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Japan–US–ROK Trilateral Security Cooperation and the Taiwan Strait Situation

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Since 2022, security cooperation has strengthened between Japan, the United States (US), and the Republic of Korea (ROK). In August 2023, the three countries held a summit at Camp David, releasing the “Camp David Principles,” the Japan-US-ROK Joint Leaders’ Statement, and the “Commitment to Consult.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023) In the following year, they convened at the ministerial and deputy ministerial levels across various sectors. In August 2024, a joint statement commemorating the first anniversary of the Camp David Meeting was published. This statement underscored the past year’s accomplishments, highlighting the execution of the trilateral joint exercise “Freedom Edge” in multiple areas and the signing of a memorandum of understanding to formalize the security cooperation framework among the three nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024). It is notable that since the Camp David Summit, “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” have been recognized as a shared concern in most joint statements from their meetings.

How are escalating military tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the potential Taiwan contingency addressed through Japan-US-ROK security cooperation? What approach is being taken regarding the Taiwan Strait issue in this trilateral partnership? Currently, specific paths of collaboration remain unclear. Therefore, this paper first examines how the response to the Taiwan contingency is perceived within the Japan-US and US-ROK alliances. Next, it analyzes the differences in the historical contexts and fundamental positions of Japan and the ROK regarding various issues. Finally, this paper explores how security issues in the Taiwan Strait can be managed within the framework of Japan-US-ROK security cooperation.

I. The Japan-US Alliance and the Taiwan Strait

China’s military activity in the Taiwan Strait increased steadily between 2017 and 2018. In response, concerns in the United States grew that China might launch a military invasion of Taiwan and that the US might struggle to defend Taiwan independently at that time. In Japan, discussions about a possible “Taiwan contingency” became increasingly active around 2021, reflecting the crisis mindset of the US

government.¹ The Japan-US Joint Statement of April 2021 reaffirmed the importance of “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” and called for “a peaceful resolution of Cross-Strait issues,” addressing the situation in the Taiwan Strait for the first time in 52 years since 1969 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021). At the end of the same year, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe participated online in a symposium organized by a Taiwanese think tank. In his speech, he remarked, “A Taiwan contingency is a contingency for Japan and the Japan-US alliance” (The Prospect Foundation 2021).

Considering the situation in the Taiwan Strait, the strengthening of the Japan-US alliance emphasizes deterring China’s attempts to alter the region’s status quo. A key highlight of the Japanese National Security Strategy published at the end of 2022 is its emphasis on equipping the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) with the capability to counterstrike China’s efforts to change the status quo in the surrounding areas and North Korea’s ballistic missile tests. This counterstrike capability would be invoked “as a necessary measure of self-defense” under the “three conditions for the use of force” in the event of “an armed attack on our country and an attack utilizing ballistic missiles as part of that assault” (Cabinet Secretariat 2022). The Japanese government expects its self-defense policies to remain unchanged.

Counterstrike capability refers to “the ability of the JSDF to utilize stand-off defense systems to effectively enable the country to counterattack within the territory of the other party.” Furthermore, the strategy outlines that the primary deployment location for these capabilities will be the defense system of the Southwest Islands. This group of islands, which stretch from Kyushu to nearby Taiwan, has witnessed frequent activity from Chinese government vessels around the Senkaku Islands. Additionally, Chinese military operations near Taiwan have intensified. As a result, the Japanese public increasingly recognizes the need to strengthen the region’s defense capabilities and prepare for potential conflicts over the Senkaku Islands and Taiwan Strait (Cabinet Secretariat 2022).

Based on the 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security, Japan could respond in three ways if a conflict arose in this region. The first scenario involves a direct military conflict between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands or a PLA invasion of Taiwan that includes an attack on Japanese territory. In this case, Japan would consider counterattacking China as an exercise of individual self-defense. The second scenario occurs if the Chinese military invades Taiwan without attacking Japanese territory. Here, the key question is whether the government should regard the situation as an “existential crisis” and utilize the right to collective self-defense to take action. The third scenario arises when the government identifies the Chinese military invasion of Taiwan as a “critical influence situation” without directly involving an attack on Japanese territory, permitting the JSDF to provide logistical support to the US military as long as it does not include the use of force (Fukuda 2023).

In recent years, numerous simulations have been conducted in Japan to envision contingencies in the Taiwan Strait. However, these simulations have highlighted several issues regarding the government’s understanding of the situation.

¹ For example, see Mallory (2021).

II. The ROK-US Alliance and the Taiwan Strait

Between the US and the ROK, the significance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait has been reaffirmed at summit meetings since 2021 (The US Embassy in the ROK 2021). However, during the Moon Jae-in administration, the debate in South Korea over a “Taiwan contingency” was subdued, with many discussions focusing more on fulfilling the demands of the United States and the risks of becoming entangled in a conflict in the Taiwan Strait (Ito 2024). Even after the government change in the ROK in the spring of 2022, conversations about responding to a Taiwan contingency did not escalate. When asked about potential responses to a Taiwan contingency in a September 2022 interview with CNN, President Yoon Suk-yeol stated, “We must first address the threat from North Korea,” and refrained from mentioning the Taiwan issue (CNN 2022-09-25). However, in an April 2023 interview with Reuters, President Yoon noted, “The Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, it is a global issue.” When pressed about China’s use of force to change the status quo in Taiwan, he replied, “We, together with the international community, oppose such a change” (Kim et al. 2023).

South Korea’s main security issue is its confrontation with North Korea. Additionally, unlike Japan, China has not been officially viewed as a threat to the ROK’s security policy in recent years. Therefore, considering its relationship with China, the ROK’s response to a Taiwan contingency is a delicate matter that is as sensitive, if not more sensitive, than Japan’s. Consequently, the ROK government has been cautious in publicly discussing its reaction to a Taiwan contingency, regardless of whether it is a conservative or progressive government. Nevertheless, since 2021, Korean experts have gradually increased their discussions on this topic. Furthermore, during the summer of 2023, conservative opinion pieces in South Korea addressed the implications of a possible Taiwan contingency on the Korean Peninsula and the ROK’s potential response to such a scenario more vigorously than ever (Ito 2024).

Peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait are crucial to the ROK. Several factors underscore the necessity of the ROK’s involvement in the Taiwan Strait. First, maritime routes around Taiwan are vital. If a crisis occurs in the Taiwan Strait, these essential sea lanes will be disrupted, posing a serious threat to South Korea’s energy security. In the Indo-Pacific strategy formulated by the Yoon administration, the issue of “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” is positioned as maritime security for the Indo-Pacific and South Korea itself rather than as a matter of policy toward China (Sakata 2024).

Second, there is a strong possibility that the situations in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula could become interconnected. This may involve North Korea taking provocative actions against South Korea in response to China’s threats or attacks on Taiwan, which could also lead China to increase its military operations in the air and sea surrounding the Korean Peninsula, extending beyond the Taiwan Strait. Third, if the US military engages in a Taiwan contingency, the South

Korean military will likely be called upon to provide logistical support to the US forces stationed in South Korea (Ito 2023a).

Moreover, the central point of the debate in South Korea regarding a Taiwan contingency is not focused on deterring China. Instead, it centers on providing logistical support to the US forces as needed while maintaining deterrence against North Korea. If a Taiwan contingency arose, some of the US forces stationed in South Korea and Japan could be deployed to the Taiwan Strait, and North Korea is likely to provoke or attack the ROK to thwart the movement. In this context, the conservative camp argues that the ROK has no obligation to engage in a Taiwan contingency. However, they stressed the necessity of being prepared for the possibility of being drawn into such a situation, as outlined above. In contrast, progressive voices are concerned about the risk of becoming entangled in a Taiwan contingency. However, they remain cautious about provoking China or expanding Japan's military presence in Northeast Asia (Ito 2024).

III. Differences Between Japan's Position and the ROK's Position

Japan and South Korea share a similar perspective on the Taiwan contingency, as there is a strong likelihood that US forces will be deployed from their bases, requiring them to provide logistical support. Consequently, there is a significant chance that their countries will be attacked alongside Taiwan. However, it cannot be stated whether Japan and the ROK have engaged in adequate debate or preparation for such circumstances. Additionally, there are notable differences between Japan and the ROK regarding the status of domestic discussions, preparations, and the specific challenges they may face.

1. Use of US Military Bases and Deployment Outside the Territory

Article 6 of the Japan-US Security Treaty specifies that the purpose of utilizing US military bases in Japan is to assist in maintaining peace and security in the "Far East" and ensure Japan's security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1960). Additionally, the exchange of notes related to Article 6 stipulates that prior consultation with the Japanese government is necessary when US military forces engage in combat operations from bases in Japan that do not align with the self-defense criteria outlined in Article 5.² In practice, there is a concentration of US Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps bases in Japan that have historically served as hubs for US military operations. Nevertheless, there has been an ongoing debate in Japan regarding whether the actions of US forces in Japan exceed the limitations set by Article 6 and whether prior consultation is being honored. Importantly, in the event of a Taiwan contingency, it is clear that this situation would fall under the definition of the "Far East"

² "The World and Japan" Database. "Exchanged Notes, Regarding the Implementation of Article VI of Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America," January 19, 1960. <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/docs/19600119.T2E.html> (Accessed February 13, 2025)

as articulated in Article 6 of the Japan-US Security Treaty, making it improbable that the question of whether the Japanese government would allow the deployment of US forces in Japan would arise.

In the ROK, there is an ongoing debate regarding the extent to which US military forces stationed in South Korea should be allowed to deploy operations beyond the Korean Peninsula as part of their “strategic flexibility.” Initially, the mission of US military forces was confined to deterring North Korea. However, in the context of the global realignment of US military forces during the Bush administration, the number of US troops in South Korea was significantly reduced. Simultaneously, a brigade from the 2nd Division was sent to Iraq. Subsequently, the 2006 US-ROK Foreign Ministers’ Meeting issued a joint statement endorsing “strategic flexibility” to facilitate the deployment of US troops from the Korean Peninsula to other regions. Nonetheless, the agreement between the United States and the ROK remains somewhat vague. In other words, while the ROK has consented to the “strategic flexibility” of US troops, the United States has vowed to respect the ROK’s stance of not getting involved in regional conflicts against the people’s wishes, theoretically allowing the ROK government to reject the agreement (Work 2023). In recent years, F-16 fighter jets from the US Air Force in South Korea have participated in joint training exercises with air forces in various Southeast Asian countries. This deployment of the US Air Force for training beyond South Korea is generally perceived as an indication that, in the event of a Taiwan contingency, it is likely that only the US Air Force stationed in South Korea will operate outside the region (Ito 2024).

2. Logistics Support for the Deployment of US Forces Outside of the Country

The JSDF will provide logistics support to the US military only if a situation in the Taiwan Strait is recognized as an “important influence situation.” This refers to a situation that significantly affects the peace and security of Japan, particularly one that could lead to a direct armed attack. According to the 2015 Peace and Security Legislation, the term “situation that significantly affects the peace and security of Japan” would be evaluated based on its scale, nature, and overall development rather than its geographical scope (e-Gov 2020). Nevertheless, the six situations that could constitute peripheral scenarios in the 1999 government’s unified view may also apply to situations with significant influence (Takei 2024, 240-242).

Following the outbreak of the Korean War, the operational commands of the ROK Armed Forces were transferred to the UN Forces under the UN Forces Command. However, in 1978, this command shifted to the US-ROK command. In 1994, operational commands during peacetime were returned to the ROK Armed Forces, while operational commands during emergencies still resided within the US-ROK Command (U.S. Department of State 1997). Therefore, the ROK Armed Forces must provide logistical support if the US-ROK Command identifies an emergency. Nevertheless, depending on how the US-ROK Command evaluates the situation on the Korean Peninsula, the anticipated responsibilities of the ROK Armed Forces and the level of logistical support requested may differ.

3. Military and Security Exchanges with Taiwan

Even before 1972, when Japan and Taiwan severed their diplomatic relations, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces never participated in formal exchanges with the Republic of China (ROC) Armed Forces. This situation is connected to the history of the pre-war period and the origins of the Self-Defense Forces. An exception occurred when former Imperial military personnel traveled to Taiwan after the war as military advisors to Chiang Kai-shek; however, these arrangements were kept secret, with army personnel acting independently. Following the break in diplomatic relations between Japan and Taiwan in 1972, interactions were limited to unofficial and practical exchanges with military and security matters viewed as extremely sensitive and potentially provoking China. After the Cold War, as the Ministry of Defense and Self-Defense Forces encouraged international exchanges in the region, Taiwan was excluded from these efforts, and interactions were confined to retired Self-Defense Force personnel and second-track engagements. However, as China's military power expanded and the regional security environment became unstable in 2003, retired Self-Defense Force personnel were assigned to the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association as de facto defense attaches. Furthermore, as of 2023, civilian personnel from the Ministry of Defense will be permanently stationed at the associations (Fukuda 2021, 18-19).

The ROK military had a history of exchanges with the ROC military until 1992, when South Korea severed its diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Its origin can be traced to when the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea had an exiled government in mainland China. Since 1974, a program facilitating the exchange of military officers between South Korea and Taiwan has been in operation, continuing until 2011 and spanning the 1992 diplomatic break (Shih 2011). South Korea has an alum association known as the Alishan Society, which consists of military personnel and veterans who spent a significant amount of time in Taiwan (Hsiao 2023). In 2011, military exchanges between South Korea and Taiwan were temporarily halted as South Korea intensified its military exchanges with China. However, since the late 2010s, exchanges have resumed in the form of veterans' increased visits to Taiwan. For instance, in 2018, retired Army General Lee Chang-hyun, a senior advisor to the former Chief of Staff of the ROK military under Moon's administration, visited Taiwan. Lee's visit was a sign that military exchange between South Korea and Taiwan had resumed (*Liberty Times Net* 2018-07-08). Additionally, several retired former military officials visited Taiwan under the Yoon administration.

IV. Japan-US-ROK Security Cooperation and Peace and Stability in the Taiwan Strait

As we have discussed, there are numerous similarities and differences in the historical context and core positions concerning how to tackle the issue of the Taiwan Strait within the Japan-US and US-Korea alliances. In this regard, after the Yoon administration assumed power in the ROK in May

2022, trilateral diplomacy among Japan, the United States, and South Korea was vigorously promoted, prompting the three nations to express their collective concern for “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.” A trilateral summit occurred between Japan, the United States, and the ROK leaders at the NATO Summit in June 2022, followed by another at the East Asia Summit in November of the same year. In August 2023, the first-ever trilateral summit was conducted at Camp David in the United States, and the joint statement from this meeting further underscored the importance of “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.” Subsequent meetings among the security chiefs of the three countries (November 2023 and October 2024), defense ministers (June 2024), and foreign ministers (September 2024) continued to emphasize “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” (Sakata 2023).

However, there are several challenges in discussing the specific response to a contingency in the Taiwan Strait within the context of Japan-US-ROK security cooperation. First, the scope of defense covered by the Japan-US alliance differs from that covered by the US-ROK alliance. As mentioned earlier, the “Far East” scope in Article 6 of the Japan-US alliance is believed to include both the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. In contrast, while the US-ROK alliance refers to the security of the “Pacific region,” it does not explicitly mention the Taiwan Strait, and the US-ROK Combined Forces Command is primarily focused on the Korean Peninsula (Sakata 2024). Furthermore, at the operational level, the Japan-US Defense Cooperation Guidelines were established with the potential for a crisis on the Korean Peninsula in mind, showing little awareness of a contingency in the Taiwan Strait.

Second, in a crisis on the Korean Peninsula, the UN Forces, established during the Korean War, supported the Japan-US and US-ROK alliances. However, this framework does not directly relate to the security of the Taiwan Strait. The UN Command Headquarters, created in Japan during the Korean War, relocated to Seoul in 1957, and seven rear-support bases were established in Japan to provide logistical assistance to the headquarters. The UN Command Headquarters played a limited role after the establishment of the US-ROK Combined Forces Command in 1978. However, from the mid-2000s onward, its functions expanded again, and in 2014, it was announced that the command headquarters’ functions were fully reactivated (Ito 2023b). Additionally, a multilateral framework called the Enforcement Coordination Cell was established in 2018, involving the countries that participated in the UN Forces to monitor North Korea’s “ship-to-ship transfers” to evade sanctions. Japan’s United Nations Forces Base has also become increasingly active (Sakata 2024).

As a result, Japan-US-ROK security cooperation is primarily progressing to address contingencies on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, if the Japan-US-ROK framework aims to specifically address concerns regarding “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait,” it is crucial to acknowledge the high likelihood of contingencies arising simultaneously in both the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. In addition, it is vital to evaluate and expand the scope of cooperation while addressing unresolved issues. As noted by Yasuyo Sakata, a Japanese expert on South Korean security policy, if an incident occurred in the Taiwan Strait, Japan and the ROK would need to manage a situation involving two fronts: the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. In such a scenario, it is

essential to assume that the ROK's primary focus would be North Korea, while Japan would focus on the Taiwan Strait, and take appropriate action (Sakata 2024). The CSIS simulation of the Taiwan Strait incident further identified that the incident would likely escalate to the Korean Peninsula (Cancian et al. 2023).

At the current stage of Japan-US-ROK security cooperation, a framework for dialogue has been established, and institutionalization is underway. However, amid the political turmoil in the ROK and the arrival of the Trump administration in the United States, it remains uncertain whether dialogue can continue. Nevertheless, given the strategic environment in which the three countries exist, it is crucial to enhance Japan-US-ROK security cooperation by linking Japan-US and US-ROK alliances. As many security experts have emphasized, it is vital to first assess the strategic concepts and operational plans of the US military, the Japan-US alliance, and the US-ROK alliance before formulating contingency plans for Japan, the United States, and the ROK. Joint exercises based on strategic concepts and operational plans are required. These exercises should address the contingencies on the Korean Peninsula and consider scenarios in which developments relate to the situation in the Taiwan Strait (Armitage and Nye 2024; Koda 2024). ■

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